REPORT OF THE GO TEAM FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING
TO THE
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT STEERING GROUP (EESG) ON
IMPROVING CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES IN ITA
JANUARY 2008

INTRODUCTION

Like many organizations in both the public and private sectors, the International Trade Administration (ITA) faces the difficult challenge of training and developing a productive workforce. The recent results of the Office of Management and Budget's Human Capital Survey have indicated that there is a significant amount of dissatisfaction in this regard within ITA. Over the course of several weeks, the GO TEAM for Career Development and Training ("the TEAM") has set out to identify points of dissatisfaction amongst the workforce of ITA, the systemic deficiencies and cultural quirks that contribute to dissatisfaction amongst employees, and hopefully, develop a set of reasonable and achievable recommendations to address the problems that clearly exist.

The TEAM has met on a number of occasions, as a whole and in sub-groups, to identify and discuss the issues, and brainstorm. Discussions were open, critical, and frank, during which a few themes began to emerge. Almost immediately, the TEAM identified a chronic lack of mobility within ITA as a significant source of frustration amongst the workforce. ITA employees feel that their career prospects are dim, that the organization does little to invest in and develop their workforce, all of which result in persistently low morale and retention challenges.

While lack of mobility quickly became the overarching theme of discussions, the TEAM also points out that mobility does not necessarily mean "up and out," as is all too common the fear amongst managers. The TEAM found that most employees were simply looking for a sense of job satisfaction, which in many cases could be addressed through training and skills enhancement. Indeed, many workers simply wanted to feel that ITA was investing in them somehow – that the organization, and especially its managers, were interested in developing a well-rounded workforce. This requires an ITA commitment to professional development in a new and focused manner.

> ## Recommendation Summary
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> 1. **Establish an ITA developmental assignment program that encourages rotation and fosters movement among ITA bureaus.**
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> 2. **Make process changes to hiring and performance evaluations to increase employee mobility and build transparency, objectivity and fairness into the review process.**
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> 3. **Improve the dissemination of training information. Ensure that supervisors' performance plans have a staff training requirement.**
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> 4. **Develop and/or revise competency models for job series so that employees have the information they need to succeed advance.**
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> 5. **Establish an ITA Volunteer Mentor Program to assist and guide employees in their professional growth.**

Fairness was also another issue that came to the forefront. Many individuals felt that the few career development and training opportunities that were offered, were not necessarily distributed fairly amongst the rank and file. In fact, a lack of trust seems to exist between managers and their employees, much of which stems from a lack of effective communication from the top down. This issue seems to be cultural as much as it is systemic and can probably be traced to what seems to most, a lack of transparency within ITA when it comes to career progression.

In short, the TEAM feels that a new emphasis should be placed on developing a well-rounded and flexible workforce within ITA, and have developed recommendations accordingly. To that end, we have also solicited feedback from outside the TEAM from various colleagues within ITA. This step was not only important in the sense that it validated many of the concerns and issues identified in TEAM discussions, but it also lends important credibility to the recommendations that follow. These recommendations are based on hours and hours of discussion, feedback, and refinement. They include both process and program changes. While we are cognizant of budget limitations, the TEAM believes our recommendations are reasonable, achievable, and would most certainly go a long way toward improving the overall morale, productivity, and well being of ITA.

We hope that <u>all </u>of our recommendations will be implemented. However, if the SPLT is able to accept only three of the TEAM's recommendations, these are the three that we would suggest:
1) Initiating administrative and professional staff rotations (Issue 1);
2) Making process changes to increase mobility and opportunities for advancement (Issue 2);
3) Investing in the training of employees (Issue 4).

The Team appreciates having had the opportunity to be of service to ITA.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING
ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Issue 1: **There is a lack of cross-fertilization between the bureaus of ITA, limiting the ability of employees to move within ITA. Each bureau seems to operate within its own sphere with little contact and coordination among CS, IA, MAC and MAS.**

Recommendation: **Establish an ITA developmental assignment program that encourages rotation and fosters movement among ITA bureaus.**

ITA should create an ITA Developmental Assignment Program that offers selected candidates (perhaps one per job series and career ladder) an opportunity to complete a rotation or a series of rotations within different bureaus in ITA at headquarters and in the field. Employees able to rotate throughout ITA will gain a broader view of the varied issues and activities relevant to the agency. Furthermore, the option to work in the private sector for a short period of time would provide ITA employees an opportunity to develop new skills relevant to the agency that he/she would not otherwise obtain. Such a program would be an effective and low cost vehicle to recognize and reward individuals and could prove to be a valuable retention tool. The team strongly believes that this should be an all-inclusive program that applies to both administrative and professional employees at headquarters and in the field.

Developmental Assignments Program Components
- ➢ A dedicated slot for career ITA employees in the offices of the Assistant Secretaries and Undersecretaries where employees could serve rotations, perhaps for four months or less.
- ➢ Rotation opportunities, perhaps three months to one year in duration, among ITA units at headquarters as well as U.S. Export Assistance Centers and Commercial Service posts.
- ➢ Temporary assignments in the private sector with companies and trade associations. (The Commercial Service's CTDY and Visit, and State Department programs are good models.)
- ➢ Options for skilled administrative personnel to fill specialist positions as a way to increase their experience and encourage career progression.
- ➢ Swaps, so that offices that have a staff member on a rotation could announce that position as a rotation option for others.

Issue 2:   **There is limited mobility and opportunity for advancement within ITA for administrative staff to move into professional series and for professional staff to move around and up in the organization.**

Recommendations: **Make process changes to the hiring process to increase employee mobility. Build transparency, objectivity and fairness in the performance review process.**

Mobility:

A. Create a Professional Progression Program (GS-5 through GS-12) open to current ITA para-professionals in critical need ITA job series.

B. Encourage mobility by allowing job openings to be advertised and filled at the full promotion potential. That means if a job is advertised as GS-9/11/12 with promotion potential to GS-13, then current GS-12s could apply for and secure the position as a GS-13.

C. Assess whether more technical GS-14 slots can be created.

D. Evaluate the feasibility of revising procedures so that after a number of years in a specified position, an employee may move laterally to another position.

E. Encourage/ require managers to develop Individual Development Plans for their staff.

F. Create a centralized bulletin board for ITA job openings that is continually updated so that employees receive news of new job openings within ITA no later than USAJOBS postings.

Review Process:

G. Review the process and criteria for promotions, as it appears there are not enough checks and balances to ensure fairness and objectivity. There should be criteria for approving and denying promotions, and employees should have access to such criteria and determinations.

H. Ensure consistency in performance ratings by posting and including in the performance review information on the average rating and the standard deviation for all ratings by a given supervisor. Knowing the comparable ratings would inform the employee and benefit employees seeking to move to other positions in ITA. Manager ratings should also be linked with employee ratings (i.e. A manager shouldn't be able to get a "5" rating, while his subordinates get"3"s).

I. Include subordinate input on manager evaluations (360 review) if anonymity is assured, and also permit 360 peer reviews.

J. Set up panels for rotations, TDYs, training, promotions, awards, and special assignments, composed of knowledgeable individuals with no conflicts of interest and ideally no personal knowledge of the individual being considered.

Issue 3:   **Training opportunities in ITA are not universally available, nor well communicated.**

Recommendations: **Improve the dissemination of training information. Ensure that supervisors have a vested interest in the training of their staff.**

Without a clear process and line of communication concerning training, employees often find out about opportunities too late. Additionally, supervisors often have the last word on training approval, which hinders uniformity and fairness across the International Trade Administration.

A.   Demonstrate ITA leadership support for employee training by making the professional development of his/her employees a part of each manager's performance plan.

B.   In order to assist employees in locating training courses suited for their career paths, ITA should build, <u>promote</u>, and <u>maintain</u> an easy to use "one-stop-shop" on the ITA intranet. This repository should, at minimum, comprise the following tools and information:

        a)   Types of training recommended to achieve position competency based on available competency models;
        b)   A catalogue with detailed descriptions of the training opportunities offered;
        c)   Peer evaluations or "reviews" of training classes with ratings, similar to the types of product reviews found on e-commerce sites such as Amazon.com;
        d)   Use available web syndication tools such as RSS, so that individuals can instantly be informed of new training opportunities and updates to existing opportunities;
        e)   A bulletin board to exchange ideas and facilitate discussion of training needs and new ideas for training.

C.   Training is now handled at the unit level. The TEAM sees a need for greater oversight of training funds. Because training funds are not currently earmarked, they are often used for other purposes. If ITA continues with its policy of giving the units discretion over training monies, the TEAM recommends that ITA senior management should mandate a minimum percentage of the discretionary budgets to use on training, and/or funding for training should come from a central ITA or unit budget and distributed equitably.

Issue 4:   **Training needs for ITA employees are not assessed.**

Recommendation: **Develop new and/or revise existing competency models[1] for job series so that employees know the knowledge, skills and abilities they need to succeed and advance.**

Currently within ITA employees have only minimal information about the competency required for their position (ie; KSAs). There is no information about what training could be used to achieve and/or increase competency. The TEAM is aware that HR has ongoing work in this area, and we request that our recommendations be factored into that work.

   A. Employees need a document that shows the knowledge, skills and abilities for a position in order to be successful. The document should contain detailed descriptions of job functions, specific competency areas, actions demonstrating competency, and the training necessary to develop competencies necessary for that position.

   B. Competency models should be developed for all position types by bureaus throughout ITA. For example, there are International Trade Specialists (Job Series 1140) in all bureaus, but the competency model for an International Trade Specialist (ITS) in MAC should be different from the model for an ITS in MAS, CS, and IA. HR could begin with five critical job titles and map out the training and skills required for those career tracks. CS has an updated competency model for an international trade specialist and this template could be used by other bureaus and for other job series (Copy attached.)

   C. Competency models should be made readily available to all employees regardless of position or division. HR to establish a task force of managers, resource coordinators and OHRM representatives to assess the training needs for each job series.

   D. Budget permitting, ITA should consider offering sessions with a contracted professional career counselor for interested employees.

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[1] Competencies are the knowledge, skills, and abilities that employees possess and can be measured in terms of behaviors. A competency model is a collection of competencies that describe a position in terms of the required level of proficiency in the competency that an employees needs in order to be successful. The most common use of competencies is in assessing learning needs where desired proficiency – current proficiency= learning gap.

Issue 5:   **Employees can face significant challenges in developing career goals and aspirations.**

Recommendation: Establish an ITA Volunteer Mentor Program to assist and guide employees in their professional growth.

New and existing ITA employees could benefit from having a mentor to offer guidance on career opportunities in ITA, and assist new and junior employees in establishing achievable career goals. While the TEAM is aware of the new departmental mentoring program, our recommendation is for an ITA-specific program focused on new employees, but open to all employees, professional and administrative, headquarters and field.

ITA Mentor Program Components

➢ New employees would have the option of having a mentor during their first year of work.

➢ Existing employees could also request a mentor.

➢ The program's success will depend upon having an adequate number of mentors from all units of ITA.

➢ Volunteer mentors should receive training and coaching on their role and be selected based upon experience and skills.

➢ HR should apply best practices from existing mentor component of other programs such as the Executive Leadership Development Program.